

## Calendar No. 142

106TH CONGRESS }  
*1st Session* }

SENATE

{ REPORT  
106-71

### DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE RESCUES

---

JUNE 9, 1999.—Ordered to be printed

---

Mr. MURKOWSKI, from the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, submitted the following

### REPORT

[To accompany S. 698]

The Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, to which was referred the bill (S. 698) to review the suitability and feasibility of recovering costs of high altitude rescues at Denali National Park and Preserve in the state of Alaska, and for other purposes, having considered the same, reports favorably thereon without amendment and recommends that the bill do pass.

#### PURPOSE OF THE MEASURE

The purpose of the S. 698, as ordered reported, is to direct the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of recovering the costs of high altitude rescues on Mt. McKinley located in Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

#### BACKGROUND AND NEED

At 20,320 feet, Mt. McKinley is the highest mountain in North America. In 1998, 1,166 climbers from 38 countries attempted to climb the mountain, an increase of 250 percent since 1978. Largely because of bad weather, only 36 percent of all climbers successfully reached the summit in 1998, down from a historical average of about 50 percent.

The 1998 climbing season was typical in that it involved climbing deaths and several life-saving rescue missions. The policy of the National Park Service is to “make reasonable efforts to search for lost persons and to rescue sick, injured or stranded persons.”

As a general rule, the National Park Service does not recover search and rescue costs. When individual search and rescue incidents cost more than \$500, they are paid from a central account

maintained by the National Park Service. Nationally, most incidents involve the use of motor vehicles or boats, or are searches for lost hikers. These search and rescue activities cost the National Park Service approximately \$3 million per year.

At Denali, the National Park Service spends about \$742,000 per year on the entire mountaineering program, including rescues. This figure includes the contract for the high altitude helicopter, supplies, educational material, salaries and work done to support good sanitation practices and other resource protection work in the Alaska Range.

Just last summer the military and the Park Service spent four days and \$221,818 rescuing 6 sick and injured British climbers who disregarded warnings and advice from park rangers stationed on the mountain. This rescue included what is probably the world's highest short haul helicopter rescue at 19,000 feet and entailed a very high level of risk for the rescue team. This is just one example of many rescues the Park Service conducts each year on Mt. McKinley.

As the mountaineering program at Denali accounts for almost one-third of the total cost of the annual search and rescue activities for the entire National Park System, some have questioned whether such expenditures for a very small and select group of park users is appropriate, and whether some sort of reimbursement for the cost of rescues should be collected. The Committee believes that a study of the suitability and feasibility of recovering such costs would provide the information necessary for such a determination. In addition, the Committee believes that the Secretary should examine whether proof of medical insurance should be a requirement for a climbing permit.

#### LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

S. 698 was introduced by Senator Murkowski on March 24, 1999. The full Committee held a hearing on S. 698 on May 13, 1999.

At its business meeting on May 19, 1999, the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources ordered S. 698 favorably reported, without amendment.

#### COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

The Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, in open business session on May 19, 1999, by a unanimous voice vote of a quorum present, recommends that the Senate pass S. 698.

#### SUMMARY OF THE MEASURE

S. 698 requires the Secretary of the Interior to complete a report on the suitability and feasibility of (1) recovering cost of high altitude rescues within Denali National Park and (2) requiring proof of medical insurance for climbing permits. In addition, the report is to review the current fee structure for climbing permits and make recommendations for any appropriate changes.

#### COST AND BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

The following estimate of the cost of this measure has been provided by the Congressional Budget Office:

U.S. CONGRESS,  
CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE,  
*Washington, DC, May 25, 1999.*

Hon. FRANK H. MURKOWSKI,  
*Chairman, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources,*  
*U.S. Senate, Washington, DC.*

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: The Congressional Budget Office has prepared the enclosed cost estimate for S. 698, a bill to review the suitability and feasibility of recovery costs of high altitude rescues at Denali National Park and Preserve in the state of Alaska, and for other purposes.

If you wish further details on this estimate, we will be pleased to provide them. The CBO staff contact for this estimate is Deborah Reis.

Sincerely,

BARRY B. ANDERSON  
(For Dan L. Crippen, Director).

Enclosure.

CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE COST ESTIMATE

*S. 698—A bill to review the suitability and feasibility of recovering costs of high altitude rescues at Denali National Park and Preserve in the state of Alaska, and for other purposes*

S. 698 would direct the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to determine the suitability and feasibility of recovering the costs of rescues on Mt. McKinley in Alaska. The bill would further require the Secretary to report on the suitability of requiring climbers to provide proof of medical insurance before they receive a climbing permit from the National Park Service. Finally, the Secretary would have to review the existing fee structure for such permits and recommend changes.

Assuming appropriation of the necessary amounts, CBO estimates that the federal government would spend about \$250,000 over the next fiscal year to implement S. 698. The bill would not affect direct spending or receipts; therefore, pay-as-you-go procedures would not apply. S. 698 contains no intergovernmental or private-sector mandates as defined in the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act and would not affect the budgets of state, local, or tribal governments.

The CBO staff contact for this estimate is Deborah Reis. The estimate was approved by Paul N. Van de Water, Assistant Director for Budget Analysis.

REGULATORY IMPACT EVALUATION

In compliance with paragraph 11(b) of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee makes the following evaluation of the regulatory impact which would be incurred in carrying out S. 698. The bill is not a regulatory measure in the sense of imposing Government-established standards or significant economic responsibilities on private individuals and businesses.

No personal information would be collected in administering the program. Therefore, there would be no impact on personal privacy.

Little, if any, additional paperwork would result from enactment of S. 698 as ordered reported.

#### EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

A formal legislative report has not been received from Executive Branch agencies on S. 698. When such reports are received, the Chairman will request that they be provided in the Congressional Record for the advice of the Senate. The testimony provided by the National Park Service at the Committee hearing follows:

#### STATEMENT OF STEPHEN C. SAUNDERS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Thank you for the opportunity to present the position of the Department of the Interior on S. 698, a bill to review the suitability and feasibility of recovering costs of high altitude rescues at Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

The Department of the Interior supports this bill if it is amended in conformance with this testimony. The bill would require the Secretary of the Interior to study three aspects of search and rescue activities carried out at Mount McKinley in Denali National Park. It would require us to review the suitability and feasibility of recovering costs for rescues; the appropriateness of the amount of fee charged; and whether we should require proof of medical insurance before we issue someone a permit to climb Mount McKinley. We believe a study of cost recovery and the amount of fee charged would be useful and in the public interest. We do not, however, believe a study of whether we should require proof of medical insurance before issuing a climbing permit would be in the public interest, and therefore request that this language be removed from the bill.

In addition to the National Park Service's public trust for the preservation of natural and cultural resources is an equal commitment to the care and protection of park visitors. The tradition of protecting park visitors from each other and their surroundings reaches back to the earliest days of the Service. Since 1916, National Park rangers have been honored at home and abroad as highly skilled, well-equipped cadre of men and women dedicated to helping those in need. It is with that tradition and mission that we approach our work in Denali and elsewhere in Alaska.

At 20,320 feet, Mount McKinley is the highest mountain in North America. In 1998 we saw 1,166 climbers from 38 countries attempt to climb the mountain; a typical number for the last few years but up about 250 percent since 1978. Largely because of bad weather, the summit success rate this year was 36 percent, down from a historical average of about 50 percent.

Unfortunately, this year was also typical in that it saw deaths and several life-saving rescue missions. It is those rescues and the costs associated with them that would be studied as a result of S. 698.

The policy of the National Park Service is to “make reasonable efforts to search for lost persons and to rescue sick, injured or stranded persons.” The question of who bears the cost of those efforts is a topic that has had repeated public discussions, usually following highly publicized incidents. In the 1970’s, Yosemite National Park attempted to bill rescued individuals for helicopter time. Few responded and there was no mechanism to force payment. At the Grand Canyon, accident victims are billed by a private helicopter operator who evacuates them—much as a person or their insurance company might pay for a local ambulance. Victims are not charged for searches.

Nationally, most parks do not recover any search and rescue costs. When the individual incidents cost more than \$500, they are charged to the national search and rescue account. Nationally, most incidents involve the use of motor vehicles or boats, or are searches for lost hikers. These incidents cost the National Park Service about \$3 million a year.

As search and rescue expenses are accounted for in various ways, it is often difficult to agree on the cost of any particular incident; among agencies it may be very difficult to compare expenses. At Denali, we spend about \$670,000 per year on the entire mountaineering program, including rescues. This figure includes the contract for the high-altitude helicopter, supplies, educational material, salaries and work done to support good sanitation practices and other resource protection work in the Alaska Range. Any costs referred to in the testimony will be included in this figure. Much of this is a relatively fixed cost arising from the lease of a helicopter and salaries of patrol rangers. On the income side, about 75 percent of the funding comes from appropriations either to Denali or elsewhere in the Service, and about 25 percent of the climbers themselves.

More significant than money, is the fact we place both employees and volunteers at risk to help those unable to help themselves. On Mount McKinley in 1998, a volunteer on a ranger patrol died while attempting to reach another climber. The ultimate sacrifice that Mike Vanderbeck made is a tragic reminder that we must do all we can to not only make the search and rescue business as safe as possible, but to prevent accidents before they happen. We believe the mountaineering program in place on Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker in Denali National Park has made significant steps in that direction, and we would be eager to undertake the review of this program that would be required by S. 698.

We regard to considering the question of whether to require climbers to have medical insurance, we do not believe a study is warranted. We believe the issue of pay-

ment for medical treatment at a hospital or other medical facility should remain beyond the authority of National Park Service or Department of the Interior. This is an issue between the private citizen, his family and his doctors. The National Park Service is responsible for the care of patients during a rescue and for their transportation to an appropriate medical facility, but should not be involved in assessing the adequacy of medical insurance for care that can extend for years beyond a person's initial injury.

With regard to the review of fees charged for a climbing permit, the National Park Service is currently carrying out that review. The \$150 fee can be raised or lowered with adequate public notice under existing authority. We expect any fee changes to be announced well before the 2000 climbing season and we will provide the completed information to the committee. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

#### CHANGES IN EXISTING LAW

In compliance with paragraph 12 of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee notes that no changes in existing law are made by S. 698 as ordered reported.

